

Frequently Asked Questions about...

Clostridium difficile (“*C. difficile*”)

Q. What is *Clostridium difficile*?

A. *Clostridium difficile*, or “*C. difficile*”, is a type of bacteria that can infect humans and cause a variety of health problems. *C. difficile* bacteria can also produce spores (dormant bacteria) that persist in the environment and make the organism very difficult to eliminate.

Q. Where is *C. difficile* found?

A. *C. difficile* can be found in humans who are infected with the bacteria, even if they are not sick. People infected with *C. difficile* are often being treated with antibiotics. *C. difficile* is commonly found in healthcare facilities. *C. difficile* bacteria and spores can also be found on items contaminated with fecal material from infected persons such as bed pans, wheelchairs, bed rails, door knobs, or other environmental surfaces.

Q. What are the symptoms of *C. difficile* infection?

A. Symptoms of infection may include: diarrhea, fever, nausea, pain or tenderness in the abdomen, and loss of appetite. *C. difficile* infections may result in more serious conditions such as pseudomembranous colitis, toxic megacolon, sepsis, and even death. It is also possible to be infected, or colonized, with *C. difficile* and not experience any symptoms.

Q. How does someone catch *C. difficile*?

A. *C. difficile* is transmitted through direct person-to-person contact (most often hand-to-hand contact) or via environmental surfaces that are contaminated with live bacteria or spores. Because *C. difficile* is shed in feces, any surface, device, or material that becomes contaminated with feces may serve as a reservoir for *C. difficile* spores.

Q. Why may patients in healthcare facilities be at risk for contracting *C. difficile*?

A. Individuals at the highest risk for *C. difficile* infection include those on antibiotic medications, persons with underlying gastrointestinal issues or prior gastrointestinal surgery, individuals who are frequently hospitalized, and those who are immunocompromised or have other chronic underlying health conditions. Because patients often fall into one of more of the risk groups mentioned above, they may be more likely to contract *C. difficile*.

Q. Can *C. difficile* be treated?

A. Yes. In many cases, stopping antibiotic treatment will help resolve symptoms of infection. It is also possible to treat the infection with more powerful and appropriately targeted antibiotics that will eliminate the *C. difficile* bacteria.

Q. What is the best way to prevent the spread of *C. difficile*?

A. The best way to prevent the spread of *C. difficile* is through hand washing. It is important to note that alcohol-based gel hand sanitizers will not kill *C. difficile* spores, so proper hand washing using soap and water is essential to prevent transmission. Regular and thorough environmental cleaning with an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)-registered disinfectant is the best way to eliminate *C. difficile* bacteria or spores on environmental surfaces. More information on environmental cleaning is available at www.epa.gov and on the VDH website. In addition, medical care providers should practice good antibiotic stewardship when prescribing antibiotics to prevent the further development of resistant strains of bacteria.

Contact your local health department if you have additional questions about Clostridium difficile